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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002099

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2027
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ ACCEPTS AMBASSADOR'S CREDENTIALS, OFFERS
COUNTER-NARCOTICS COOPERATION

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Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Richard Downes,
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) In a surprisingly cordial October 29 meeting, the Ambassador presented his credentials to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez Frias. President Chavez repeatedly stressed during the 35 minute discussion that the United States and Venezuela were not enemies and that his door was open "24 hours a day". Commenting favorably on the recent meeting between A/S Shannon and FM Nicolas Maduro in New York, Chavez said we should seek ways to increase cooperation, offering counter-narcotics as an example. While the friendly tone of the meeting was not surprising -- as Chavez is generally cordial at events like this one -- his offer to explore renewing cooperation on fighting drug trafficking was. Reaching out to the United States on counter-narcotics cooperation may serve his attempts to refurbish his image internationally at a moment when European and Caribbean nations also are increasingly concerned by drugs transiting Venezuela. We will move quickly to test the sincerity of Chavez' offer.

PUTTING ON THE CHARM

¶2. (SBU) An upbeat President Chavez met with the Ambassador for just over 35 minutes during the presentation of the Ambassador's credentials at Miraflores Palace on October 29. This was two months after the Ambassador arrived at post. The Ambassador was accompanied by his wife, the DCM, POLCOUNS and CG. (The DATT was traveling and Chavez' noted his absence remarking "Where are the military?") Chavez was accompanied by FM Nicolas Maduro and several other staff. A video feed of the meeting was televised live on a government-controlled channel. The Italian, Chilean, and Vietnamese Ambassadors also presented their credentials separately the same afternoon. A relaxed and expansive President Chavez reminisced for some time before getting down to business. In particular, he spoke positively and at length of a trip he took to North Carolina hosted by former Republican Congressman Cass Ballenger.

COUNTER-NARCOTICS

¶3. (SBU) Turning to the bilateral relationship, President Chavez said that he was pleased that A/S Shannon and FM Maduro met on the margins of the UNGA in New York. He noted the meeting was a positive step forward and that the United

States and Venezuela were not enemies. Ambassador Duddy said that Venezuela and the United States would continue to disagree on many issues, but it was important to increase dialogue and seek opportunities for cooperation. Chavez said "Let's put counter narcotics on the table." He acknowledged that Venezuela was a major trafficking transit point, but like other countries, was also a victim of drug trafficking. He recognized the two countries had difficulties in this area, but suggested that we dust off the proposed bilateral agreement on DEA cooperation and look for other ways to work together. Gesturing towards FM Maduro, Chavez promised the Ambassador regular access to the Foreign Minister. He added that his own door was open "24 hours a day" for discussions or calls on this and other issues and said he would welcome further opportunities to sit down and talk with the Ambassador.

COMMENT

14. (C) As the Ambassador departed, FM Maduro whispered to him that it was a good meeting. Chavez appears to have concluded, at least for moment, that while we have differences, there may be benefits to renewing cooperation in an arena where progress would be in Venezuela's own interest and pay dividends with the Europeans and others. One reason he may be publicly entertaining counter-narcotics cooperation with the United States is because reports of trafficking through Venezuela are increasingly prominent in the international media. These reports focus negatively on Venezuela's efforts to counter drug trafficking. Embassy will pursue his invitation for dialogue and cooperation and see if BRV doors remain open after the December referendum on constitutional reform. The Ambassador will be meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Jorge Valero on November 2 and will also seek further engagement with FM Maduro and President Chavez.

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DUDDY